GUIDELINES FOR EVALUATION OF LEARNING RESOURCES

This document was prepared collaboratively by
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I. ROLE OF THE REVIEWING PROCESS

Reviewing involves first-hand preview and evaluation of resources in all formats. This knowledge leads to more informed purchase decisions and thoughtful use of resources to enhance, support and impact student learning.

Reviewing may be done independently or collaboratively. Collaboration provides an opportunity to:

☛ share with colleagues observations regarding the quality and suitability of materials.
☛ identify the many ways resources might be used in a variety of school settings.
☛ compare several titles on a given topic.
☛ refine critical and selective skills.
☛ share, discuss and question new materials – receive feedback regarding the resource needs of schools in the district.
☛ broaden knowledge of titles.

II. RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE EVALUATOR

What differentiates resources for children and young adults from adult resources in the choice and treatment of subject matter. Therefore, when reviewing, it is the responsibility of the evaluator to:

☛ be objective.
☛ be aware of the difference between censorship and informed selection.
☛ read and/or examine the entire resource.
☛ remember that popularity and quality are not the same thing, but both aspects should be taken into account.
☛ compare the resource with others in the genre or on the same subject.
☛ consult experts about accuracy and authenticity. Remember that students are experts on child appeal!

Evaluation Forms included in this handbook are means by which evaluative criteria are consistently addressed. Each resource which requires a fiduciary transaction is expected to have a thoroughly completed evaluation form. The decision to recommend or not to recommend is a serious one. Remember that your decisions should be based on district needs and not just the needs of the school. "Highly Recommended" should be used very sparingly and only for an outstanding resource that is considered a top priority purchase.

III. EVALUATIVE CRITERIA

A. DISTRICT

The criteria used to evaluate resources establish a standard against which materials are assessed and deemed appropriate for schools and the Recommended Resources Lists. Since the listings are recommendations for district wide purchase, reviewers must always be aware that their decisions should be based upon district, as well as individual school program needs. District concerns are reflected through the following guidelines:

1. Resources will support and be consistent with the general educational goals of the province and the district. They will also support the aims and objectives of schools, as well as the curriculum and programs offered within those schools.

2. Resources will be factually accurate and current.

3. Resources will take into consideration the varied interests, abilities, learning styles, special needs, and maturity levels of students.

4. Resources should have aesthetic, literary and/or social value.

5. Resources will have a physical format, appearance and technical design which is suitable for their intended use.

6. Resources will be identified to provide varying points of view in order to allow schools to develop balanced collections.

7. Resources will be selected to reflect the diversity of our society.

B. SPECIFIC

1. Fiction

a) *Characterization*

- How are characters developed – through narration and description; dialogue and monologue; actions?

- Are characters multi-faceted and credible? Is behaviour age appropriate and well grounded in cause and effect?

- Does the author avoid stereotyping characters?

b) Plot

- Is the plot original, believable and fresh in the telling?

- Is the plot well structured with events logically ordered and well paced?

- Does the story noticeably build to an identifiable climax?

- Is the story enjoyable?

- Is the plot full of action or is it more psychological and introspective?

c) Setting

- Does the author clearly and effectively establish prime time and place?

- Does the setting impact on the story and on character development?

- Does the story transcend the setting and express universal themes?

d) Style

- Is the style appropriate to the subject and to the intended audience?

- Is the style overly simplistic and colloquial?

- Does the author use figurative language to create mood and extend meaning through imagery?

e) Theme

- Is the theme relevant and interesting to the intended audience without being overpowering or didactic?

- Does the theme emerge naturally from the story?

f) Illustration

- Is the illustrative style in harmony with the work as a whole?

- Are the illustrations positioned to enhance the design? Do they interfere with the flow of the text?

- Do the illustrations enhance or extend the text in a meaningful way?

- Are the illustrations accurate and consistent with the text and setting?

2. Picture Books

Fine picture books address children's needs and interests and offer pleasing artistic and literary experiences to their readers. A picture storybook, as differentiated from an illustrated storybook, presents a seamless whole that conveys meaning through both the art and the text. Illustrations expand the meaning and share in moving the story forward.

a) *Content*

- Is the content appropriate for its intended age level?

- Will the book appeal to children, or is it really written for adults?

- What is the quality of language?

- Does the story development reflect the principles of good fiction writing?

b) *Illustration*

- Are the pictures an integral part of the text and do they help create meaning?

- In what way do the illustrations extend the text; provide clues to the action of the story; show character delineation; reflect the mood of the story; provide any visual metaphors?

- Are the pictures accurate and consistent with the text?

- Do the illustration authentically depict a specific setting?

- What medium has the illustrator used (woodcuts, lithography, collage, photography, paint, pen and ink, crayon, chalk, pencil, paper sculpture)? How does the medium complement the text?

- How does the illustrator used line, shape, colour and perspective to extend the story?

- How would you describe the style of illustration (delicate, vigorous, stylized, realistic, decorative)? Does the chosen style enhance the text?

- How has the artist varied style and technique?

- What techniques create movement and rhythm?

- How has the artist created balance in composition?

c) *Format*

- Does the size of the book and its type seem appropriate to the story and its theme and purpose?

- Do the jacket design and endpapers convey the spirit of the story?

- In what way does the title page help the reader anticipate the story to come?

- Does the book contain special features like tabs or pop-ups? In what ways do they enhance the meaning of the story?

- How does the page and/or design elements (line, space, colour, perspective) of the book help to enhance meaning of or convey mood and emotion?

3. Easy Readers and Transitional Books

Some picture books have characteristics that make them accessible to beginning readers but most of them, intended to be read aloud to children, are written at a reading level much higher than that of the emerging reader. "Easy readers," "beginning readers," or "readers" are written for children learning to read using simple vocabulary, large typeface, and short sentences. One step up from readers are "transitional" books featuring simple sentences and short chapters.

The creators of the books have taken the reading process into account in their development by attending to both **content** and **design**. Recall that children decode words by sounding them aloud, develop a store of "sight" words, train their eyes to move from left to right across lines of print making it easier to decode words made up of fewer than five letters, and shift from reading aloud to decode the words to reading silently for meaning.

a) *Content*

Vocabulary

- Are sight words used?

- If not, are they less than five letters?

- If they are long words, how are they used?

- Are there picture clues to help the children figure them out?

- Are the words likely to be a part of a child's natural oral language?

Sentence Length

- How many words appear in them?

- If long sentences are used, are they alternated with short ones?

- Do you notice a lot of commas in the text? If so, is this a more difficult level?

Plot

- Does it begin by using short sentences and simple concepts?

- Does it establish the setting and introduce the subject or characters quickly?

- Is it likely to make children want to turn the pages and keep reading?

- Are action verbs used to move the plot along?

- Are characters developed through the interaction?

- Does the author use repeated actions in a creative way?

- Are surprises balanced with predictable elements?

Illustrations

- Do illustrations give essential clues to help out with difficult words or concepts?

b) Design

Size of Typeface

- The standard size for beginning readers is 18 points

Line Length

- Beginning readers should have lines between two and ten words in length.

Space Between Words

- If the type is 18 point, there are 18 points of space between lines.

Number of Lines Per Page

- The number of lines should not exceed 15.

Amount of White Space Per Page

- A lot of white space around words and pictures gives the eye a place to rest.

c) Transitional Books

- A simple vocabulary without too many surprising descriptors or multi-syllabic words – what words has the author used? Are they common, everyday words for a seven or eight year old? If the word is unfamiliar, are context clues given?

- Sentences that are short, direct, uncomplicated – do long sentences alternate with short? How are longer sentences constructed? Do you see more than a few commas per page?

- Brief episodes, chapters, or intervals that stand out to the reader – chapters of 6-8 pages follow the actions of 1-3 characters in one place at one time; can the chapter be summed up easily in a few words? Does the author use helpful descriptive phrases to let the reader know exactly where and when the action takes place?

4. Folklore (Folktale, Fable, Legend, Myth)

- Is the story a good example of its type? How does it compare with others of its type?

- Does the style reflect an oral tradition, or is this literary treatment?

- Is the story complete, or are there omissions or changes? Are alterations justified?

- Is the story clear to children and suitable for them?

- Is the plot structure simple and direct with a quick flow of action?

- Is the culture source identified and its values reflected in the theme of the story? Is the art of the culture used as a motif (i.e., borders)?

- Are sources or other additional information provided?

5. Collections

- How is the material organized – thematically, culturally, linguistically, geographically?

- Does the volume contain clarifying material such as maps, genealogical charts, glossary of unfamiliar names?

- Is the material well chosen and of consistent quality?

- Does the collection offer variety to the reader?

6. Poetry

Poetry should present a new perspective or comment on life in dimensions which are meaningful for children and employ an economy of well-chosen words.

- Does the poetry speak to children, not at, or about them?

- In what ways is the poetry unique?

- How does the rhythm, rhyme, imagery, figurative language and shape interrelated to create and reinforce the meaning of the poetry?

- What forms (lyrical, narrative, ballad, limerick, free verse, haiku, concrete) are used in the poem/poems?

- What is the style and medium of illustrations? Are they effective in enhancing the meaning of the poetry?

7. Anthologies

- How many poems and poets are included?

- What types of poems are included? What is their subject matter? Are these selections available elsewhere?

- Is the poetry of consistent quality and well chosen for the intended audience?

- How is the volume arranged? What indexes does it contain?

- Where is this volume indexed?

8. Non-Fiction

a) *Accuracy and Authenticity*

- Are facts consistent within the text and with other sources?

- Regardless of copyright date, how up-to-date is the information in the text and illustration?

- Are facts, theories and speculation clearly distinguished?

- Do text and illustrations avoid stereotyping?

- To what extent has a "revised edition" been updated?

b) **Content and Perspective**

- Are examples and anecdotes appropriate and relevant?

- Is the resource within the comprehension and interest range of its intended audience?

- Is the purpose immediately evident?

- Does the text indicate interrelationships; cause and effect?

- Are concepts and ideas adequately discussed and developed?

- Do extensive or outstanding illustrations dominate inferior text?

c) **Style**

- Is the information presented in a clear and understandable but interesting writing style?

- Is the meaning of new vocabulary developed in context?

d) **Organization**

- Is the organization (thematic, chronological, question and answer, general to specific) the most appropriate for the subject matter and the intended audience?

- Is the information appropriately sequenced to foster understandings and avoid confusion?

- Do frequent, clear subheadings or similar indicators clarify organization and facilitate scanning and skimming?

- Are reference aids (table of contents, index, glossary, bibliography, search engines, etc.) extensive and useful?

e) **Illustrations and Format**

- Are illustrations truly meaningful in clarifying and extending the text?

- Are illustrations placed appropriately so that relationship to the text is evident?

- Are size relationships accurate?

- Are a variety of appropriate illustrations used?

- Are illustrations clearly captioned or labeled?

- Are photographs sharp with clear, recognizable images?

- Do illustrations reflect a variety of genders and cultures?

f) Science

In addition to general non-fiction and evaluation criteria:

- Do text and illustrations avoid attributing human traits, motivations and a sense of purpose to objects and processes in nature (animism, anthropomorphism)?

- Does the resource lead to an understanding of the scientific method? Does it foster the spirit of inquiry?

- Does the resource indicate related social problems?

- Does the text oversimplify concepts to make them understandable?

g) History

In addition to general non-fiction evaluation criteria:

- Is the scope of the work broad or narrow, exhaustive or condensed?

- Is the treatment objective and balanced?

- What is the basis of research – primary or secondary sources?

h) Biography

In addition to general non-fiction evaluation criteria:

- Is the subject's life of interest to young people? Does it offer valuable insights and perspectives?

- Is the resource an independent work written by an expert or part of a standard formula series?

- Is the resource well researched, with sources clearly documented?

- Are the facts consistent within the resource and with other treatments of the same object?

- Do the text and illustration provide a realistic balanced multi-dimensional portrayal of the subject?

- Are quotations, dialogue and background information naturally integrated into the work?

- What qualifies the author to write on the subject?

- Does the author avoid stereotyping, moralizing and didacticism?

- Is the historical accuracy sacrificed for the telling of a good story?

- Does the work focus on an individual's life or on a theme, e.g., the work of a scientist, football player, etc.?

- Is the point of view (narrator, first-person) appropriate for a young reader?

- Is a discography, list of work, awards, etc., included?

9. French Language Resources

In addition to general fiction/non-fiction criteria:

- *Niveau de la langue:*

  Is an attempt made to match the reading level to the students reading level?

- *Regionalism:*

  Does the resource include heavy usage of current slang?

- *Translation:*

  Is the material easily accessible in the English language version? Does the translation meet acceptable standards? If a resource is a translation, does it honour the original author's intent?

- *Bandes déssinées:*

  Is this resource a sophisticated satirical art form or is it actually a comic strip?

- *Cursive writing:*

  Is cursive writing at the appropriate grade level?

- *Cultural differences:*

  Are cultural differences appropriate to age and maturity level?

- *Format of books:*

   Is the book standard format or does it include puzzles, activity cards, stickers, etc.?

10. Audio Visual

In addition to fiction/non-fiction criteria:

- Does the resource hold your attention throughout?

- Is the length appropriate for the age level?

- Are there any technical concerns – clarity, framing, sound, music, etc.?

11. Electronic Programs

In addition to fiction/non-fiction criteria:

- Does the program meet basic thinking skills (rote memorization, drill and practice)?

- Does the software enhance critical thinking skills (problem solving, conceptionalization, synthesis of information)?

- Are there any noticeable technical difficulties (loading, ease of use, printing, graphics)?

- Is the program engaging and interactive (hyperlinks, sound, video, animation)?

- What will the program be used for in the school, for preference, remedial, enrichment, production or curriculum tool (Hyperstudio, Clarisworks)?

12. CD-ROM

In addition to fiction/non-fiction criteria:

- Is the search engine command or menu driven?

- Is it easy to search (access points, Boolean operators, proximity operators, help features)?

- Is there an appropriate blending of visuals, text audio and animation?

13. Internet Sites

In addition to fiction/non-fiction criteria:

- Is there more recent, frequent or accessible data in a comparable non-Internet site item?

- Are there any noticeable technical difficulties (links do not work, delivery slow, search engines do not function)?

- Is the author, organization, or institution recognized as an authority on the subject?

- What is the quality of each of the sites that are hyper-linked?

IV. SCHOOL EVALUATION PROCEDURES

School evaluation procedures encourage the involvement of staff, students and parents in the evaluation process. This serves a variety of purposes.

☛ To provide students and teachers with experience in examining a resource from a critical point of view.

☛ To provide opportunities for staff to explore and share possible creative uses for resources in a variety of settings and programs.

☛ To ensure that people involved in previewing resources understand the criteria to be considered and the procedures for completing evaluation forms.

Student evaluations must be accompanied by an evaluation written by a staff member.

V.   SELECTED REFERENCES

[Available at Professional Resource Centre, Viscount Bennett Centre.]

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